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ABSTRACT

Public service radio programming provided by state extension services will change drastically in the near future due to broadcast deregulation. The two aspects of deregulation affecting land-grant radio programming are elimination of the limit on the number of commercials per hour, and elimination of requirements specifying the amount of news and public affairs programming. As a result of these changes, many states are shifting emphasis from agriculture and other traditional topics to more consumer-oriented programming, and states that do not permit local sponsorship of their programs may experience problems. In some states with large special audiences, loss of free air time may be countered by syndication of some land-grant programming, or networking and satellite delivery of programs directly to intended audiences for a fee. This paper includes 13 references and offers, as example, a description of recent trends in programming by the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service. (SV)

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Broadcast Deregulation Presents New Options for Land Grant Radio Public Service, News Programming.

By Barry W. Jones

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Introduction

... Background

Informational programming provided by employees of land-grant institutions in each state is "standard fare" on local radio stations around the country. Some of this radio programming is prepared by county agents, and county home economists, but much of the material is produced by a staff of paid radio professionals and technicians operating from a central office in each state. In some states even much of the material used by county staff members is "ghost-produced" by state staff professionals.

These radio personnel are part of offices of information in every state, usually situated on the land-grant university campus. Each office has a number of functions to perform for its organization, with programming for radio being only one function. One general principle guides each office. They exist to convert scientific information about the subjects of agriculture and home economics into lay terms.

These roles for radio programmers in land-grant organizations have evolved primarily because the administrators (directors) of the various state organizations regard providing information to the public as an essential function for their organization. Additionally, radio is a relatively inexpensive media alternative to accomplish that purpose.

The role was first defined in the Smith-Lever Act early in this century when Congress set the Cooperative Extension Service in motion and charged the land-grant system with the mission to take basic and applied research, produced by U.S. Department of Agriculture and land-grant university scientists, and disseminate it to a consuming public.

In keeping with that legislative charge, most land-grant administrators today enthusiastically regard news media as "partners" in the process of educating those people in the public that the land-grant system is charged to serve.

As a consequence, the amount and variety of programming provided primarily as a public service to radio stations in each state has grown enormously over the past 40 years. What started

as a limited tape service in each state has grown from providing a weekly farm information show of five-to-ten minutes duration into a diversity of radio programming aimed at not only farmers but homemakers, working women, youth, gardeners, parents, pet care enthusiasts and a number of other subjects for which the Extension Service employs specialists with expertise.

This radio programming is provided predominantly as a tape service in most states today, sent either daily or weekly to a list of client radio stations that can range in number as high as 400 in some states. While most states depend on mail tape delivery, some are now looking into the possibility of satellite delivery as well. Still other programming is marketed through networks that serve radio stations either statewide or regionally, and some states now provide call-in services where radio stations call via dedicated phone lines to tape daily programming. Similarly, some states send menus of weekly or monthly programming for stations to order those programs desired.

Most of the programming provided by land-grant institutions is targeted and specialized in nature, such as information for farmers, but an increasing amount of programming in certain areas of expertise such as youth, gardening, pet care, child development, etc., can be and often is targeted for general radio audiences.

Distinct differences in scope and direction of radio programming exist in each state, because each office of information is autonomous and organized to serve primarily publics within the state. For that reason one state has been chosen as a representative sample for the purpose of this study.

... Mississippi As Example

The Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service is one of the state land-grant organizations that has been deeply involved in producing radio programming for Mississippi commercial radio stations for more than 40 years. In the early 1950s, the Mississippi Extension Service located at Mississippi State University began producing and distributing a weekly farm show entitled Better Farming to radio stations. The show, originally five-to-ten minutes in length, continues in production today but has been shortened to run from three-to-five minutes. To Better Farming over the years has been added other programming such as Better Living, aimed at homemakers; Take Two, aimed at youth; Bottom Line, a second show aimed at homemakers; and In Mississippi Gardens, a weekend show aimed at urban home gardeners. All of these shows, except for Better Farming and In Mississippi Gardens, run less than two minutes each. In addition

to this programming, a daily call-in service, Daily Radio Newsline, is dedicated to short, hard news stories about agriculture and agricultural events. Agricultural economists and crop production specialists are used as sources. Other special reports are produced each week, especially for large market radio stations in Jackson or Memphis, Tennessee, as well as for networks serving the state. In addition, some of this basic programming is now being packaged for Public Radio in Mississippi located in Jackson.

Mississippi has just 191 radio stations. The Extension Service at present serves around 60 of those stations with its Better Farming show. That number has remained static, at least for the past six or seven years. (1) This means the Extension Service is reaching slightly less than a third of the commercial stations in the state with Better Farming. This percentage can be raised some when AM/FM simulcasting is taken into consideration. For the newer programming produced by the Extension Service, station usage drops off, primarily because the programming is more specialized. The youth program, Take Two, is used by 30 stations and the homemaker program, Bottom Line, by 45 stations. The newest and most specialized of the programs, In Mississippi Gardens, is reaching 60 stations and is primarily used on Saturday mornings. The Extension Service estimates that those stations carrying its programming are averaging about ten minutes of air time per day devoted to one or all of the Extension Service programs. That estimate would total ten hours per day of Extension programming used by commercial radio across the state, and more than 2600 hours per year, based on five-day weeks. (2) If the Extension Service were to attempt to buy this air time for its informational programming in Mississippi, it would cost them an average of $1.2 million annually to purchase the air time. Under present arrangements, it now costs the Extension Service about $4700 to reach client stations with its programming annually. (3) This figure does not include salaries and capital investment costs needed periodically to keep the tape service in operation. Still, the figures do graphically depict how important it is for the Extension Service to remain a public service programmer in Mississippi.

Radio programming provided by the Extension Service in Mississippi is in most instances locally-sponsored at the commercial stations that receive it (this is allowed by the Extension Service as long as basic programming is not edited or otherwise altered). Even with deregulation of the broadcast industry in recent years, the Extension Service programming continues to receive good use and good time slots on most of the stations that receive it. (4) No client stations have been lost as a direct result of deregulation. Many stations are using the programming in desirable time slots such as the noon hour and the 5:45 to 7 A.M. period for farm programming and repeated plays

throughout the broadcast day for consumer-oriented and youth programs.

Two phenomena account for the continued good response to programming in Mississippi that may not occur in all states. They are:

-- the fact that stations can line up local sponsors for the programming. Some Extension Services prohibit this for the programming they produce.

-- the fact that a very large number of the stations in the Mississippi radio market are formatted as country or Christian music stations. Extension Service programming is particularly suited to those formats. However, despite success to date, some potential pitfalls do exist for this kind of radio programming. Those states where radio markets are heavily urbanized and where a great deal of diversity of station formats are occurring are experiencing problems for the kind of programming the Extension Service undertakes. Stations that once looked favorably on this material because of Federal Communications Commission public service requirements now feel no compulsion to use it and are in fact dropping their use of the material. This also occurs to some extent in Mississippi.

This situation is causing many land-grant organizations to reevaluate their role in radio programming. The result has been that many states are shifting emphasis from agriculture and other traditional topics to more consumer-oriented programming. Those states that do not permit local sponsorship of their programming are finding it more difficult to place their materials. Deregulation obviously poses some real problems for this type of public service programming. Continued programming of this sort may demand some new radio strategies. This study is directed at exploring some of those potential alternatives.

Deregulation, Programming Issues

Deregulation of broadcasting, begun in 1981, has had an impact on the type of radio programming traditionally supplied by organizations such as the Extension Service. While this study is not intended as an investigation of deregulation as such, it is germane to the subject under review and deserves comment.

The two aspects of deregulation impacting on land-grant radio programming are:

-- that radio stations are no longer required to limit the number of commercials aired in a given hour of programming.

-- that radio stations are no longer required to offer specified amounts of news and public affairs programming. (5)

The rationale behind the FCC decision is that no need exists to limit the time given to commercials because listeners would not tolerate stations jammed with advertisements. Neither should stations be required to offer specified amounts of news and public affairs shows, since listeners now expect programming about local issues. (6)

> "The occasional guy who departs from the responsible operation of his radio station will fall prey to competitors who do it right," says Donald Wear, general manager of WHP in Harrisburg, Pa. ... "Most broadcasters know that the only way to be successful is by immersion in their communities." (7)

Opponents of deregulation obviously do not agree with the position that Wear and other broadcasters take on the issue. Opponents fear the process will do irreparable harm to program quality. Likewise, many traditional, free-time broadcasters, such as the Extension Service (religious organizations are another example), fear that in the long run their programs will be dropped in favor of income-producing programs.

> For example, The Lutheran Hour, sponsored by the Lutheran Laymen's League of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, is aired on some 1,100 stations ... "The program is so good and the audience so large that some ... stations would retain it, but a number of stations undoubtedly would drop us," said league spokesman Walt Cranor. In many communities ... deregulation will endanger most of these broadcasts.... (8)

Some of the doomsday concerns issued when deregulation began have not come to pass, but there have been changes in programming. One of the bigger losers in the programming shuffle has been local news. Deregulation is the apparent cause. Writing in GQ, television critic Ron Powers laments the demise of local news programming on radio.

> ... local news may soon become the exception on radio instead of the rule ... Deregulation

> has abetted the decline of radio news ... It has given license (as it were) to broadcasters' narrowest and greediest instincts and has worked against the public interest; it has failed in its merits and should be rolled back. (9)

Radio broadcaster Jim Cameron also is concerned. Writing in The Los Angeles Times, Cameron says "the old system of checks and balances between the broadcaster and regulator are all but gone."

> The proponents of deregulation would argue that unfettered competition among broadcasters will best serve the public's needs, providing them with programming they want to hear. Clearly this has not happened. All that's improved are broadcasters' bottom lines. And at what cost and at what return to the public...broadcasters want their cake, and they want to eat it, too. They would have us believe that the airwaves belong to them, not to the public. (10)

...Specialization Promoted

Deregulation has brought with it other trends and among them has been more specialization in programming. Coupled with new technologies, format specialization has blossomed in radio, particularly at network levels. This diversity also is filtering down to local stations. With the switch from land line to digital satellite delivery, some networks are now capable of feeding programming over 20 channels. This is having an impact on the industry. (11) The impact is so great that some radio executives are warning station operators that they "should not lose sight that radio's main mission is to serve the needs of the community." (12) However, local stations may find it hard to buck this trend. In a Broadcasting Magazine commentary, Sondra Michaelson, a radio time buyer, wrote in 1983:

> Stations can no longer afford the luxury of being all things to all people. More and more we are in the age of media and format specialization. The radio networks understand this, and are programming themselves accordingly. The successful radio stations are doing the same. How far can this trend go? Who knows? (13)

...And Syndication

One of the prime beneficiaries of this trend toward specialization in radio programming has been syndication. Norman Patitz, president of the California-based producer/syndicator Westwood One, says the syndication business is "very, very bullish. I don't think there is a distinction between syndication and network programming anymore. It's not a matter of doing business with syndicators or networks --it's doing business with suppliers of national programming." (14)

> The variety of programming possibilities afforded by satellite transmission has led to an influx of programming creativity as networks and program services cater to ever-increasing listener demand. (15)

... And Live Programming

Syndication and network capability to transmit via satellite also has given rise to a broad slate of live programming, a trend likely to continue into the future. This type of programming carries with it strong implications for both entertainment and what some stations call "infotainment" (News). Use of satellites to deliver specially produced "live" programming has been intensifying, and the concept has become critical to the success of some radio syndicators. (16)

> Industry executives also report that the trend toward long-form programming --both live events and studio-produced specials -- will undoubtedly gain momentum with ... satellite reception. (17)

The proliferation of all-news and news/talk stations in recent years also point to an increase in live programming in all of radio. Specialization is likely to follow in the news area as well.

> They (trends) point to more informational programming, both local and national,and to a delivery that abandons the traditional approach to simply reading the news in favor of a more

> conversational style that demands involvement of the listener. "The more live programming a station can offer, the more successful it will be," said Jeff Grimes,news director,KXL (AM) Portland, Ore., who predicts the future of news radio will involve much more on-the-scene continuous coverage of events.... (18)

Discussion

What is clear from reviewing the issues surrounding both deregulation and current trends in commercial radio programming is that land-grant organizations that do programming will need to produce differently in the future. Deregulation will force the development of new program strategies. Those states that do not allow local sponsorship of what was previously free-time programming will have to abandon such strategies or find themselves without a market for their programs. Emphasis on programming exclusively for farmers will need to shift in the direction of programming for consumer-oriented audiences, such as programs on gardening, pet care, clothing, nutrition, etc. The programming for farmers will need to become highly specialized and must be carefully packaged so that radio stations can "sell" such programs to local sponsors. The advantage to this for a land-grant institution as originator of such programming is that better play times on local radio stations will be assured. In Mississippi, local sponsors have included farmer cooperatives, tractor dealerships, etc. Those kinds of relationships will be sought and nurtured more fully for the programming under deregulation.

In some states where special audiences may be large enough to warrant such a strategy, "syndication" of some land-grant programming may be feasible. The ability to sell some programming that may now be being produced free of charge may become a realistic option, given the current trends toward large budget cuts in publicly-funded institutions. In some states, sales of many "how-to" publications at one time provided free of charge have been very successful for specialized audiences such as home gardeners.

Special, large audiences (home gardeners or even farmers in some states) may entice some land-grant programmers to make use of networking and satellite delivery to get programming directly to intended audiences, also for a fee. Many Extension Service radio professionals are looking at ways to economically deliver present programming to client radio stations via satellite. To that end some states (Mississippi included) are contacting

networks with proposals for live programs to be directed at farmers, home gardeners and other clientele. Frustrations over not being able to get appropriate times for informational programming are likely to speed the process toward these programming directions.

Conclusions

What this review of the effects of deregulation and of various trends in radio portend for a land-grant radio programmer is that a virtual revolution for his or her work is on the horizon. Within the next ten years, this programming will change dramatically. Based on the results of this study, the following directions are suggested:

-- Land-grant institutions will place greater emphasis on consumer-oriented subjects at the expense of more traditional farming subjects. This will be a natural consequence of an effort to place programming on a greater number of radio stations in each state, especially in urban radio markets.

-- Radio professionals working in land-grant offices will spend more of their staff time on schemes to recruit more local sponsors for programming before production commitments are made. The days of producing programming and then taking a chance it will find a market are numbered.

-- Resources will be shifted from typical general programming such as Better Farming to more specific subjects such as "How to Produce This Year's Soybean Crop."

-- Satellite delivery of land-grant programming to radio stations will become a reality within the next five years. (This may come through agreement with an existing network or financed independently).

-- A strategy that essentially follows present commercial syndication will be tried for Extension Service programming. Some programming will be sold to commercial stations. Because of budget cuts this will become a necessary option for some organizations. (This could be a very healthy development for both the resources and quality of land-grant radio programs. In many cases, expertise to shift to such a programming approach is already in place).

-- Special live broadcasts of Extension Service programming is just around the corner, and will be delivered via satellite. (All that is lacking on this in Mississippi is an administrative commitment and sponsorship).

-- State organizations unwilling to move in some or even all of the preceding directions will either opt out of radio programming altogether over the next 10 years or resign themselves to taking just what they can get from commercial stations, which usually means 4 a.m. time slots.

Mississippi remains one of the most rural states in the nation and has a large percentage of its population involved in agriculture and interested in the type of programming the land-grant institution can produce. Studies of farmer listening habits conducted in the state support this fact and further suggests that these farmers depend heavily on local radio for much of their information about farming. (19) Therefore, trends explored in this study, will have at least two impacts on this farm audience. The impacts are:

1. Trends away from local programming toward networks could have a detrimental effect on farmers. Without land-grant programming, farmers could be forced to go to an extreme expense to gain some of the information they now take for granted.

2. The trends toward specialization and live programming can be both a blessing and a curse for farmers. The curse might be a dramatic shift away from farm programming to consumer-oriented programming, but the blessing could be the opening of new vistas of information for farmers that would not have been dreamed of just a few years ago.

Finally, the fears of deregulation, while forcing changes, could turn out to be a grand opportunity for those radio professionals attempting to produce radio programming that supports the land-grant informational mission.

NOTES

(1) Data on the status of programming provided by the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service is compiled annually by the Radio Editor. Such data is compared each year. Total number of radio stations is provided annually by the Mississippi Broadcasters Association. All information used was provided by Radio Editor John Wells, based on a survey of stations conducted in 1985.

(2) Ibid.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Henry Eason, "Static Over Deregulation," Nation's Business, (June 1983), 72.

(6) Eason, 72.

(7) Eason, 72.

(8) 'Decisions Ahead on Deregulation," Christianity Today, (October 5, 1979), 66.

(9) Ron Powers, "...And Now, a Nanosound for the News," CQ Magazine, (April 1985), 110.

(10) Jim Cameron, "Public Owns the Airwaves, but the FCC is Giving Them Away," Los Angeles Times, (January 15, 1984).

(11) Author Unknown, "1983 Comeback Year for Radio," Broadcasting, (August 29, 1983), 33.

(12) "1983 Comeback Year for Radio," 33.

(13) Sondra Michaelson, "Taking a Reading on Radio's Health," Broadcasting, (August 29, 1983), 20.

(14) Author Unknown, "Syndication World Takes on Look of Specialization," Broadcasting, (August 29, 1983), 48.

(15) Author Unknown "Radio 1983: Being All Things to all People," Broadcasting, (August 29, 1983), 48.

(16) "Syndication World," Broadcasting, 78.

(17) Author Unknown, "The Business of Radio: Networks," Broadcasting, (August 29, 1983), 53.

(18) Author Unknown, "Radio News: The Sound Salvation," Broadcasting, (September 27, 1982), 60.

(19) Based on a survey of farmers in Mississippi and their radio listening habits. The survey was conducted jointly by the Department of Agricultural Education, Mississippi State University and the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service. Surveyors included Johnny Morgan, student at Mississippi State University and John Wells, radio editor, Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service. Survey completion date: August, 1985.